

(Baptism of the Lord)

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Matthew 3:1-17

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.”

Last spring, to fulfill his Tech Ed High School requirement, Sam took the class - “Family Home and Auto.” Among the many practical things he learned was how to change a tire.

Have you ever had to change a flat tire? It really isn't an easy thing to do. Trying to figure out where your spare tire, which while technically a “tire” isn't really one these days. And then there is the “jack”. How does it work? And getting the lug nuts loosened, well, how many of us have used a few choice words trying to do that?

Changing a tire can be a challenging, frustrating, time consuming endeavor. It can also be risky, depending on where you located when you have to change it.

While it has been years, thanks to road side assistance, since I have had to change a flat tire, I changed several tires over my lifetime. Perhaps the most challenging of all was on the Dan Ryan Expressway in Chicago. It wasn't just challenging, it was down right the scariest thing I ever had to do.

Sometimes, and often more than once in our lives, out of necessity so we can continue to our destination, we all have had to take off an old tire, and put on a new one.

The challenge of changing, the frustrations we experience in doing so, and the risks involved with changing is at the core of Matthew's story we just read.

As I mentioned, all four Gospels tell the story of John the Baptist who, dressed in a camel hair outfit, is standing in the waters of the Jordan River (more a glorified, muddy creek), proclaiming a message of “Repentance.”

“Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near!” And people, a bit curious, a tad hopeful, somewhat excited, are coming out to the wilderness to hear John's message of “Repentance”.

The Hebrew word for “Repent” is “Shub” or “Sub”. In Hebrew it can also be “Mentaneo” or “Nacham” In its different forms, the Hebrew meaning of the word for “Repent” means: “a radical change of mind toward sin and implies a conscious moral separation from sin and a decision to forsake it and agree with God”; “...to lament, to grieve which describes the emotions that are aroused when motivated to take a different course of action;” and “to have another mind, which describes that radical change whereby a sinner turns from the idols of sin and of self to God.”

A Biblical Scholar once said, to “Repent” is much like changing a flat-tire, where in you took off the old and put on the new one.

To “Repent” is far more than just simply saying, “I'm sorry” or “regretting our actions”. Rather, “Repentance” is to engage in the radical act of taking off one's old mind set, old way of relating to and seeing other people, and replacing them with God's ways. It is a total radical mind, heart and soul make over!

It is also a life-long experience. Years ago, I took a "liturgical dance" class. We learned movement of the body has been used as a form of prayer and praise throughout the history of the religion. In some churches, the choir and ministers, process in to worship, in a rhythmic movement taking two sets forward and one step back. This dance symbolizes the act of life-long repentance, as we move closer to God's ways, but are always stepping back away from them too.

"Repentance" is not a word we like to use as much these days. Perhaps it is because it has been for too long, associated, often in negative ways, with street preachers and television evangelists, who stood before us, wagging a finger at us, making us feel guilty and ashamed of ourselves, and telling us to "Repent"?

So we have recoiled against the word because of the negative images and emotions we have associated with it and left it in our past, never giving it another thought as we enter worship each Sunday. I mean we are after all, "Christians" already, that is why we are here this morning, isn't it? What do we have to "repent" from in our lives? We really have no reason to change our hearts, our minds, our world views, our long held beliefs, our view of "those" people, and even of our belief about God, do we?

Don't ask John the Baptist that question. If he stood here this morning, he say to us what he said to others who claimed they were already "heirs of Abraham" and had nothing to repent from in their lives. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham."

Harsh words back then and they still are today. John did not win many friends with the political and religious leaders as he confronted them in much the same way he did people like you and me. Which is probably why John ended up in jail and literally, losing his head, having it served up on a platter to Herod.

And you struggle with some of my messages from the pulpit. How would you handle John's words if he stood here and told you not just to "repent" but to bear fruit worthy of repentance?

John's message is still one we need to hear and reflect on today, though I doubt we really want to take it to heart. Back in the 11th century, Jacopone da Todi, said: "**Were John the Baptist to return and denounce the sin of the world, once more they'd cut off his head.**" We might not cut his head off today, but we might just fire him?

As challenging as it is for us to change a tire, the act of "repentance" that bears fruit worthy that really reflects our lives being rightly aliened with God's ways, is even more challenging. It is a life-long learning process. It demands we take a long, hard, look inside ourselves, being honest about our relationships and beliefs about other people, not just those seated here beside you or your family, but the strangers you meet, and people around the world. Repentance invites us to examine our lives through the lens of God.

The reason we can honestly do this, and do it often, is because the Kingdom of God has come near, in human form, in the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God teaches and shows us a new way to be human and to relate to one another: with justice, compassion, mercy and a special love for the poor, the needy, the stranger, the immigrant, refugee as well as people like you and me.

Perhaps it is time for us to "Repent" together as we remember whose we are and who we are in the waters of baptism.

Building the Bridge Between Jesus' Infancy & Adulthood

When we were last together, Matthew told us from Joseph's account, how Jesus was born. Just like any father, Joseph was short and to the point: Mary got pregnant, not sure about marrying her, in a dream I was told by an angel to marry her, special child, had to name him Jesus and so when he was born, I did.

Over the past two Sundays, you have explored through Matthew's Gospel, with Hugh Drennan, the lineage of Jesus connecting him to the house of King David, which given Matthew's audience he is writing for is a very important piece of information and then the story of the Magi's visit.

From now until Easter, we will be reading through the Gospel of Matthew. Today, we pick up the story of Jesus, jumping from his infancy to the beginning of his adult ministry.

Each of the four Gospels tell the story of the beginning of Jesus ministry, when he, like the people around him, come out to the wilderness to hear John the Baptist's message and be cleansed from their sins in the waters of the Jordan River, though each tells it slightly different.

Many Biblical scholars believe that when Jesus comes up out the water and the heavens open and the Spirit of God descends like a dove, lighting on him and the Voice says: This is my son, my Beloved, with him I am well pleased. Listen to him." That this is the moment Jesus becomes the "Anointed One" or "Messiah".

Before Jesus enters the waters just like every other common person, he too must hear John the Baptist's call for "Repentance" - which is meant to be heard by all. As was the message from God through the prophets prior and still is a message meant for us to take to heart today, John's words calling people to turn from their old ways of thinking, believing and relating - and return to God's ways, that will be more fully revealed in Jesus.